

THE BURNING BUSH

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**LESSONS I AM LEARNING AT
HOLY DORMITION MONASTERY
Fr. John Konkle**

Spring 2019 marks the tenth anniversary of my wife, Psa. Ana, and my coming to serve at the Holy Dormition Monastery. It is, accordingly, a time of reflection on, and thanksgiving for, the many blessings, both manifest and unseen, of the last decade. Gifts received that shape the soul, that orient the mind, that renovate the heart, that tame the passions. I discovered that I was imperceptibly being given such gifts by reflecting on what I said to others in homilies, confessions and informal conversations. I noticed that what I was saying didn't come from me, but from what others had taught me—by word or deed—sometimes with a single encounter with a single person, and other times by prolonged inhaling of the fragrance arising from scores of interactions. Here I record only a few of these gifts, ones which have congealed to the point of being concisely expressible.

Do what is in your heart

I was walking from the Trapaza to the old St. Andrew Chapel with a monastic. The community was gathering to do a service before the Kursk Root wonderworking icon. It was the first time I had been in the presence of such a celebrated icon. I had arrived at the Monastery only a few months earlier, but I had been here long enough to know that when it came time to venerate the icon I would have to go first—out of respect for the office of the priesthood, most certainly not because I knew what I was doing. So, on the way to the chapel, I asked the monastic, “What am I supposed to do? How do I venerate a wonderworking icon?” She replied, “Do what’s in your heart.” “Not very helpful,” I thought—but didn’t say; “I want to know *the right* thing to do.”

The time came to venerate the icon and, predictably, I had to go first. I did whatever I did; I can hardly say that it was what was in my heart because I had no idea where my heart was at that moment, let alone what was in it. Anxiety does that to us. But I do vividly recall doing what all of us insecure Orthodox do in such unfamiliar circumstances: nonchalantly scrutinizing what everyone else did to see if I had done the right thing. Obviously I hadn't, I thought, since no one followed my example. -

As weeks became months and months years, I witnessed many people—Metropolitans, hieromonks, monastics, and pious faithful—coming to the Monastery. Their piety was expressed in a multitude of different ways. I don't mean “anything goes,” but rather that love for Christ, His

mother, the saints, and the Church is profoundly freeing, and the reverence that flows out of a heart of love is manifold. There are a lot of flowers in the field, and they don't all look alike; the field is more beautiful for it. Thanks to this early encounter, and the unrelenting opportunities to practice, the simplest way to sum up my past decade is my feeble but persistent efforts to find, enter and remain in my heart. How else could I do what was in it?

Accept correction joyfully

One Sunday in the summer of 2009 I was leaving the sacristy in the old St. Andrew Chapel after Divine Liturgy. As I walked through the narthex toward the doors to go to lunch, six women were lined up side by side, their backs to the pews that resided under the windows. As I passed, they each bowed down toward me. I thought this was a bit strange, a rather extreme act of honoring a priest. Not wanting to draw any more attention to myself than I had to, I continued on my way toward the trapaza, not acknowledging them in any way whatsoever. I was only a few steps out the door when one of the women scurried up to me and tried to explain, in somewhat broken English, that I had neglected to give them a blessing. She (correctly) interpreted my evasion of their actions as ignorance and not malice. She had the boldness to explain patiently to me that their bowing was a request for a blessing, which the priest performs by first blessing them on their bowed head and then letting them kiss his hand.

I don't remember who this woman was. At that point, everyone was new to me; everyone looked alike. But I will be forever grateful to her—she had the courage to correct and teach a new priest, and to do so with gentle persistence. Sure, I was embarrassed. Who likes to be ignorant? But by God's grace, I received her instruction with joy for she saved me from a practice of unintentionally insulting those who piously desire a blessing. What a kind gift she offered to me.

I have, of course, been corrected many, many times since then by many people for many things. I have not always received such corrections with joy, I'm sorry to say. But gradually I have noticed how it is possible to receive such corrections with joy *by choice*. St. James says to "consider it all joy when you encounter various trials" (Jam 1:2), and being corrected is certainly a trial. The point is not that the correction is always showing us the one and only 'right way' to do things, but often that this is how things are done at this monastery, in this parish, among the faithful of this ethnic background, under this bishop, etc. Submitting to correction from others, instead of responding defensively or clinging to 'the right way', is a tremendous expression of love, as well as the doorway to a more genuine communal life.

Do what's in your heart, and accept correction joyfully.

The two previous teachings are, in my experience, inextricably bound together. I described them separately, because they originated from different sources, but it is misleading to separate them. In practice they are woven into a seamless garment. I don't say to myself, or to others, one without the other, but rather "Do what's in your heart, and accept correction joyfully." The former without the later produces a self-assured independence divorced from communal life, and the later without the former yields a people-pleasing detachment from our innermost selves. The two fused together, however, deepens both our inner life and our communal life.

You'll be judged in the condition you're found

I had been angry for nearly three weeks. Not a volatile anger. A quiet seething, more like a tea kettle that is letting off steam, but not enough to make the whistle blow. I don't now recall at whom I was angry, or why, but I do recall it dampening my spirits, covering my soul with an invisible dust cloud like Pig-Pen in a *Peanuts* cartoon. Internally irritable but outwardly presentable. I finally made it to confession and asked for advice on how to overcome my slavery to anger, and the judgment and defensiveness that accompanies it. My confessor simply and without hesitation replied: "When that happens to me, I try to remember that Christ could come back for me at this very moment. When I do that, the anger departs." Immediately upon hearing his humble words, the anger left me. I was free for the first time in weeks. I do not recall any time since then that anger has held me in bondage. Sure, I've succumbed to anger on different occasions, but not persistently so. His simple instruction became so associated in my mind with anger, that soon after an occasion of becoming angry I am reminded of what it would be like if Christ were to return for me *now*. The anger always leaves at that very moment.

The vividness of this experience opened my eyes to the practical implications of our Lord's teaching on His Second Coming. When He comes again, when He comes for us, we will be judged in the state that we are found. If the master of the house would have known when the thief was coming, he would have prevented the robbery (*cf* Mt 24:43-44), but as it was he was robbed in the state he was found. If the servants would have known when the master of the house was coming, they would have been ready to receive him instead of partying (*cf* Mt 24:45-51); they will be judged as they are found when the master returns. The five foolish virgins should have had oil, but they are judged in the state they are found, as are the wise virgins (*cf* Mt 25:1-13). This teaching should apply, of course, to all my sins, and I pray that in time the leaven I've been given will leaven

the whole of me. For now, I'm grateful for the leaven I've been given.

Prepare for the future by living in the present

I find myself frequently advising people with these simple words: The best way to prepare for the future is to live in the present. We are so often stressed about some upcoming events, about what might, or might not, happen. We quickly find our thoughts pulled into future scenarios which seem ever more real and certain to us, even though in truth they are completely products of our hyperactive imagination. Indeed this is a vortex that we all enter from time to time, some of us more than others. Due to my zealous inexperience, I'm sure in the early years of my time here I tried to encourage people in this situation by helping them evaluate and plan more realistically about their future uncertainties. I suspect that this is sometimes what is needed, but I increasingly realized people were coming to the Monastery for *spiritual* advice, and not crisis management skills.

What spiritual advice did I have to offer? I was so often seized by the same magnetic pull into imaginary futures. At the risk of oversimplification, God provided two avenues of teaching that greatly help me personally, and I hope have been a help to others. The first came from the Scriptures. In the morning service we read a Gospel for the saint of the day, which is often a martyr. The Gospel reading typically includes words like these: "And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (Lk 12:11-12; cf. Lk 21:14-15; Mt 10:19-20). No one was persecuting me, but as I reflected on these words so frequently repeated, I began to realize that someone being arrested for their faith would be tempted to start planning their future defense before the authorities—exactly what Jesus was warning them not to do. It's as if the advanced planning would cut them off from attentiveness to the Holy Spirit at the moment of inquisition. How should they prepare, then, I asked myself? The answer that kept coming to me was simple: the best way to be attentive to the Holy Spirit in the future is to be attentive to the Holy Spirit now. Was that what Jesus was telling them to do? If so, it seemed applicable to the many times that my thoughts are drawn into imaginary futures of my own making—even if not in contexts of persecution. By letting my imagination run wild, I was severing my attentiveness to the Holy Spirit not only in the present, but in the future as well.

This way of understanding our Lord's words was reinforced when I was given a copy of *The Orthodox Word* from 2011 containing an article entitled "Eternity Hidden in the Moment" about the Romanian Elder

Arsenie (Papacioc). Here, in a mere 40 pages of text, I experienced one man's life totally devoted to experiencing eternity in every moment. Having our thoughts caught in the past or the future was a lethal distraction from experiencing God in the moment, from being attentive to the Holy Spirit, from tasting eternity now. Our Lord's teaching, incarnated in the life of Fr. Arsenie, planted in me the desire to forsake self-constructed imaginary futures and live in the present reality. I do succumb more often than I wish to a mind that wanders into future worries, schemes, and dreams; but I now often hear a quiet voice in the midst of my uncontrolled thoughts: "Prepare for the future by living in the present."

Glory to God for all things! And thanks to you, my many teachers! ■

(Note: for those interested, the translation into English of Elder Arsenie's life and teachings has been completed, and is available from St. Herman's Press, 2018, under the title, *Eternity in the Moment*.)



GATEWAYS INTO THE HEART

Fr. John Konkle

St. Philotheos, an ascetic in the tradition of St. John of the Ladder, refers to the heart as the 'noetic Jerusalem.' Jerusalem is the city of peace. The heart, however, is often likened to a city with much chaos in it. "What comes out of the mouth," our Lord says, "proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Mt 15:18-19). And concerning these corrosive elements in the city of the heart, King David says "In the morning I will slay all the sinners of the land, cutting off all the workers of lawlessness from the city of the Lord" (Ps 100:8, LXX). The city of the Lord, as the holy Fathers of Orthodoxy understand King David's words, is the heart which has been filled with sins and lawlessness--thieves that are stealing our inner stillness, preventing our heart from being the true city of peace, the noetic Jerusalem, the city of the Lord in which He reigns. How, practically, do we slay the destructive forces of our heart, replacing them with the peace that only Christ can give? St. Philotheos instructs us on how to enter our heart, slaying these thieves of inner stillness, by passing through three gates.

The First Gate: Silencing the Tongue

The first gate of entry to the noetic Jerusalem—that is, to attentiveness of the intellect (*nous*)—is the deliberate silencing of your tongue, even though the intellect itself may not yet be still (Philotheos, “Texts on Watchfulness”, #6, *Philokalia*, Vol. 3).

Our tongue has to be silenced, and that only happens with deliberate effort. It doesn’t come easy. This voluntary silencing won’t *immediately* calm our nous, Philotheos counsels us, so we should not grow discouraged as we are learning to pass through the first gateway to the heart. Stopping the chatter, however, is a necessary precondition to inner stillness. So long as we feed the desire to speak, the desire will strengthen within us and become increasingly difficult to control. If, on the other hand, we consciously and purposefully restrict our needless talk, we weaken the desire to fill ‘dead space’ with our sound waves. We become better listeners and discover that the ‘dead space’ is filled with a life-giving, still, small voice.

Jesus warns us about our practice of useless words in a surprisingly stern way: “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned’ (Mt 12:36-37). The Greek word for ‘idle’ is *argon*, which comes from the word *ergon*, meaning ‘work’, preceded by an ‘a’, meaning ‘not’. Idle words are words that don’t do any work. They come out of our mouth, but they have no purpose, no goal; they don’t accomplish anything of value. Yet, our Lord teaches, they condemn us. Why? St. Philotheos is giving us one such reason: because we are using them to avoid facing our inner turmoil, to avoid the hard work of finding and entering our heart—the meeting place with our creator and redeemer. We cannot be justified without Him, and yet we cut ourselves off from Him—thereby condemning ourselves—by empty words that hide us from the kingdom of God within (*cf* Lk 17:21).

This is insightfully and practically illustrated by a saying from the Desert Father Abba Peter the Egyptian. One of the brothers came to him and asked, “When I am in my cell, my soul is at peace, but if a brother comes to me and speaks to me of external things, my soul is disturbed.” Abba Peter replied by telling him, “Your key opens the door.” The brother didn’t understand so Abba Peter explained, “When someone comes to see you, you say to him, “How are you? Where have you come from? How are the brethren? Did they welcome you or not?” Then you have opened the brother’s door and you will hear a great deal that you would rather not have heard.” The brother admitted that is exactly what happens, that it is his own

questions that are the cause of the talkativeness of his visitors, which in turn undermines his inner peace. (Abba Peter the Pionite #2; see the entire saying for Abba Peter's solution for retaining peace in the midst of conversations.)

The Second Gate: Controlling Food and Drink

The second gate is balanced self-control in food and drink" (Philotheos, "Texts on Watchfulness", #6, *Philokalia*, Vol 3.).

Just as we need to stop filling the air with empty words as a way to avoid the soft words of the Savior, so too we need to cease filling our stomachs in response to unconstrained desires for food and drink, which often are simply our way of dealing with anxieties, worries, tensions, hyperactivity, and so on. St. Paul warns that for some of us our belly is our God (Phil 3:19). What does he mean? That our desires for food and drink control us instead of us controlling them. For example, we turn to food and drink for comfort, instead of to Christ, when our inner lives are agitated. So long as we continue to live in this undisciplined state, we prevent ourselves from passing through the second gate toward the heart where peace can reign.

Returning to the metaphor for the heart as a city, the Desert Father Abba John the Dwarf instructs us in this way: "If a king wanted to take possession of his enemy's city, he would begin by cutting off the water and the food so that his enemies, dying of hunger, would submit to him. It is the same with the passions of the flesh: if a man goes about fasting and hungry the enemies of his soul grow weak" (Abba John the Dwarf, #3; *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Benedicta Ward, p. 86).

If we want to slay the heart's enemies, fasting is *the* foremost prescribed Orthodox practice. Roughly half the days of the year we are asked to restrict in some way what we eat; to have our food and drink consumption not be a matter of our will, but of the will of Christ speaking through His Church. In following the fast, we are fulfilling His words that after the bridegroom goes, his followers will fast (see Mt 9:15; Mk 2:19-20; Lk 5:35). If we think of this topic in the context of confession, it seems common for us not to bother confessing breaking the fast, or we trivialize our failure as relatively minor and unimportant. We think, "What difference does a little cheese on Friday matter?" So long as we focus on the food, and not on the desire, we will feel comfortable letting ourselves off the hook. But the sin is not the eating of cheese *per se*; that is simply the occasion in which we're controlled by our desires and passions. And if we think that *they* (our desires and passions) are 'no big deal', then why don't we bother to control them? The deeper reality about our lives is that we hide behind the thought that restrictions on food are inconsequential in order to avoid admitting the

power our desires have over us.

Less emphasized, but no less important, is the consistent patristic teaching that we *never* eat to satiation, to fullness, but rather always get up from the table with a slight hunger remaining. They say this should be true even on Pascha itself, for the Feast of Feasts especially is not a time to satisfy the desires of the flesh but the desires of the heart. (See, e.g., St. John of Sinai, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 14; St. John Cassian, *The Institutes*, V.9,20,23.) In this way, every day we remind our body that it does not control us, but we control it. As Abba John the Dwarf instructs, we are not feeding our desires but training them to submit to us, to our self-control which is the fruit of the Spirit manifest in us. Accordingly, our inner turbulence caused by uncontrolled desires is exposed and slain, and the pathway into our heart is further opened.

The Third Gate: Ceaseless Mindfulness of Death

“The third [gate] is ceaseless mindfulness of death, for this purifies intellect and body”.

Mindfulness of death sounds like such a morbid thing. How could it possibly be helpful to us? How could it contribute to purifying the nous and the body? Listen to how St. Philotheos continues, how he describes his experience of keeping death ever before his mental gaze. “Having once experienced *the beauty* of this mindfulness of death, I was so wounded and *delighted* by it—in spirit, not through the eye—that I wanted to make it my life’s companion; for *I was enraptured by its loveliness and majesty, its humility and contrite joy*, by how full of reflection it is, how apprehensive of the judgment to come, and *how aware of life’s anxieties*. It makes *life-giving, healing tears flow* from our bodily eyes, while from our noetic eyes rises *a fount of wisdom that delights the mind*. This daughter of Adam -- this mindfulness of death -- I always longed, as I said, to have as my companion, to sleep with, to talk with, and to inquire from her what will happen after the body has been discarded. But unclean forgetfulness, the devil’s murky daughter, has frequently prevented this (Philotheos, “Texts on Watchfulness”, #6, Philokalia, Vol. 3; emphasis added.).

Far from the gloom that we associate with death, Philotheos experiences focussing his attention on death and judgment as putting everything in proper perspective. His sheer and abundant joy testifies to the reality that he noetically sees, sees with the heart, the transformative presence of God in the ultimate brokenness of this world: death. He experiences the joy of purification that St. John teaches in his First Epistle: “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him

as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies Himself as He is pure (1 Jn 3:2-3).

Longing to see Christ prepares us to see Him as He is so that we might then be like Him. In practice, this purifying hope in Christ's return often takes place as a corrective to temptations or sins, as the Desert Father Abba Sisoës describes: "A brother asked Abba Sisoës, 'What shall I do, Abba, for I have fallen?' The old man said to him, 'Get up again.' The brother said, 'I have got up again, but I have fallen again.' The old man said, 'Get up again and again.' So then the brother said, 'How many times?' The old man said, 'Until you are taken up in virtue or in sin. For a man presents himself to judgment in the state he is found' (#38, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Benedicta Ward, pp. 219-220).

If we keep in mind that Christ is coming for us at any moment, we will be strengthened to withstand temptations, be encouraged to get up after having fallen, and most importantly of all, be cultivating the attentiveness that leads us through the third gateway into the heart.

Let us, then, by the prayers of St. Philotheos, strive to enter the heart through these three gates: silencing the tongue, controlling the desires for food and drink, and being constantly mindful of death. In this way we slay the passions that rob us of our inner peace and that dislodge us from our true home: the city of the Lord, the noetic Jerusalem. ■

**FOURTH YEAR MEMORIAL FOR
FATHER ROMAN
SATURDAY MAY 11, 2019**

**SPRING WORK DAY
Saturday June 1, 2019
Please bring your gloves and rakes**

**OCW RETREAT
Saturday July 13, 2019
For registration please call
Loreta Gates at: 248-689-9721**

REMEMBERING FATHER ROMAN

The Fingerprints and Icons of God and Universes to Explore

Our parish was blessed to come to the monastery for a retreat. After lunch we sat at a long table talking with Father Roman. He gave a short talk, then asked what questions we had. One man asked Father about nature and creation, saying that he felt closest to God when he was alone in a beautiful place such as a forest. He felt he could worship God better in such a place.

Father responded that yes, God's creation is beautiful and we feel close to God when we enjoy it. But nature is just the *fingerprints* of God whereas people are His *icons*.

Relationships with people, made in God's image, are so important. Yes, God is with you in the forest and you pray to Him, but God's people are not there! Father stressed how important it is to be together in church to worship God with one another.

Father showed his regard for people as icons of God as he treated each person with such respect and interest. He loved the variety of different people that he met.

Another time when I was at the monastery I was to have Confession with Father at a certain time. He asked me if I could meet a little later than we had planned because someone visiting wished to speak with him and could not stay later. When I did meet with Father, he was so animated. He expressed how wonderful it was to meet a new person, and how interesting the discussion was. He said, "When I talk with a new person it is like opening and starting to read a new book!" Now, Father loved books and was well-read on a huge variety of subjects. But he said conversing with a person was even more fascinating—"Each person is a whole universe!"

PLEASE NOTE:

In preparation for a book on the life and teachings of Father Roman, we asked that anyone who has memories or had any experiences by interacting with Father Roman that you write them down and send them to us, or maybe just tell us and we make a note of them. The inclusion in the book of those experiences and memories will be anonymous.

**HOLY WEEK / PASCHA/ BRIGHT WEEK
SCHEDULE OF SERVICES - 2019**

Sat., April 20: **Lazarus Saturday**

Holy Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom— 9:00am

Vigil — 6:00 pm

Sun., April 21: **Palm Sunday**: Holy Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom — 10:00am

Bridegroom Matins — 7:00 pm

Holy Week

Mon., April 22: Presanctified Holy Liturgy — app. 9:30 am

Bridegroom Matins — 7:00 pm

Tues., April 23: Presanctified Holy Liturgy — app. 9:30 am

Bridegroom Matins — 7:00 pm

Wed., April 24: Presanctified Holy Liturgy — app. 9:30 am

Holy Unction — 2:00 pm

Bridegroom Matins — 7:00 pm

Thurs., April 25: 3RD, 6TH, 9TH Hour — 8:15 am

Vespereal Liturgy of St. Basil — 9:00 am

Matins with Passion Gospel — 7:00 pm

Fri., April 26: Royal Hours and placing of the Shroud in the Tomb — 10:00 am

Lamentations — 7:00 pm

Sat., April 27: 3RD, 6TH, 9TH Hour — 8:15 am

Vespereal Liturgy of St. Basil — 9:00 am

Resurrectional Matins and Paschal Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom -11:30pm

Paschal meal to follow — all are invited to partake.

Sunday, April 28 - PASCHA: Paschal Vespers — 1:00 pm

Bright Week

Mon., April 29: Matins — 9:00 am followed by Holy Liturgy app.: 10:00am.

Lunch will follow.

Tues., April 30: Feast of St. George

Matins — 8:00 am followed by Holy Liturgy app.: 9:00 am.

Lunch will follow.

Thurs., May 2: Great Vespers of the Feast (Lifegiving Fount) — 5:00pm.

Fri., May 3: Feast of the **Lifegiving Fount**: Matins — 8:30am followed by Holy

Liturgy app.: 10:00 am and Blessing of the Water.

Lunch will follow.

Sat., May 4: Resurrectional Matins — 9:00 am

Divine Liturgy — 10:00 am.

Lunch will follow.

Sun., May 5: **Sunday of St. Thomas**: Akathist, 3rd Hr., 6th Hr., — 9:00 am

Holy Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom — 10:00 am followed by procession to the cemetery and blessing of the graves.

